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A PERFECT PIECE OF STOICISM by Robert D. Richardson, Jr.

Early in 1865, less than three years after Henry Thoreau's death, Ralph Waldo Emerson edited a small volume of his friend's letters. Entitled simply Letters to Various Persons, the book was not a complete collection of Thoreau's correspondence, but rather a selection of letters -- and nine of Henry's best poems -- intended, as Emerson explained to Sophia Thoreau, to exhibit "a most perfect piece of stoicism." Right from the start both the volume and Emerson's comment have caused considerable controversy. Sophia had doubts about Emerson's handling of the volume. Finding that Emerson had failed to include letters or parts of letters showing what she called "some tokens of natural affection" she protested that "it did not seem quite honest to Henry" to omit them. Late in January 1865, Ellen Emerson "wrote to her father that Miss Thoreau had called that day anxious about the proofs and desires that you should know that all kind beginnings and endings of Mr. Thoreau's letters and little messages to friends being left out give a too cold idea of him, agreeing with the popular notion that he wanted affection."

When the volume appeared it was something of a compromise between what Emerson wanted and what Sophia Thoreau wanted. Even so, it was the occasion of James Russell Lowell's famous and hostile review which praised Thoreau's writing but criticised him personally as cold and humorless. And ever since 1865, the idea of Thoreau as a stoic has kept reappearing. Henry's defenders have on the whole deplored the label of stoic, while his attackers have used the word as a club. Brooks Atkinson talked about Thoreau's "stoical, boorish and provincial" behaviour, and Mark van Doren described him as "cold and inhuman, a perfect stoic."

The generally accepted idea of a stoic is that of a person who is cold, aloof, lacking in sympathy, indifferent (or pretending indifference) alike to pain, suffering, friendship and love, someone who renounces emotions and feelings and grimly makes a virtue of impassive, armored endurance. This, the popular view of stoicism, is completely negative, it concerns itself only with personality traits, its condemnation can be summed up in the one word "unfeeling" and it is I think essentially inapplicable to Henry Thoreau. Certainly he could be a bit stiff upon occasion. The view that Sophia lamented, that he was lacking in affection, undoubtedly had some sort of basis, he could indeed be proud or aloof, but anyone who has read his journal, his poems or his letters must realize at once that he simply cannot reasonably be called an unfeeling man. His letters to Lucy Brown, to Lydian Emerson, to the Emerson children, his relations with Ellen Sewall and her younger brother, the stories of his keeping

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school and his recorded feelings about the possibility of having to leave home, his response to his brother John's death and to the death of Emerson's son Waldo, and many many more examples spring to mind, all of them showing us a man of quick sympathies, sometimes confused or inchoate to be sure, a man sensitive and easily hurt, a man of strong and not always very controlled feelings. How can a man who writes "there is no remedy for love but to love more" be taken as a stoic? His journal is filled with comments reflecting his gusto, his appetite for experience, the keenness of his senses, the sheer joy of being alive. And if at times he withdrew from others or cultivated, as we all must, what a great English novelist called "the patient renunciation of small desires," we may remember what T.S. Eliot said in defense of his claim that "poetry is not a turning loose of emotion but an escape from emotion, not the expression of personality but an escape from personality." Eliot went on to point out that "of course only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things." All the evidence suggests that insofar as a stoic is a cold and unfeeling person, Thoreau was no stoic.

We must therefore wonder to find so many of his close friends and admirers agreeing that he was in some sense a stoic. Bronson Alcott, one of the most welcome of Thoreau's visitors at Walden Pond said "there is in him an integrity and sense of justice that makes possible and actual the virtues of Sparta and the Stoics." Channing, another close friend and frequent companion said, "he was a natural stoic, not taught from Epictetus nor the trail of Indians." Samuel Storror Higginson speaks of Thoreau's "stoical principles," Bradford Torrey, who edited the Journal, thought Thoreau "a pretty stoical sort of Epicurean" and even Franklin B. Sanborn, who disliked Emerson's volume of Thoreau's letters enough to do a compensating volume of them himself, said of Emerson's volume, "It is not probable . . . that we shall ever find in so few pages, so much of the genuine life and spirit of the man, as these letters show us. They bring us nearer to him, and to his point of view than anything else has ever done."

Surely if Emerson, Alcott and Channing, who loved and admired Henry, to say nothing of other and later admirers, were agreed that there was an important stoic side to him, we are bound to inquire further before we can discard the description. Of course Emerson could be wrong about Thoreau. He was wrong on occasion, and neither Alcott or Channing is to be trusted absolutely in everything he says, particularly about such a controversial character as Thoreau. But to find all three agreeing -- and agreeing repeatedly on this point of stoicism suggests that there is something there to be dealt with.

We may begin by asking what stoicism meant to that group of writers at that time, and I think we will have less difficulty with that hard term 'stoic' when we recall that for Emerson and Alcott and the Transcendentalists generally, stoicism meant much more a body of ideas than it did a personality stereotype. Stoicism, like Zen, is a body of philosophical doctrines, a group of perceptions, and, also like Zen, it is more than that. It has aspects of a religion, and is in fact a way of life with a certain perennial attractiveness.

Stoicism dates back to Zeno, who lived during the latter part of the Fourth century B.C. at the time when Alexander the Great had shattered the traditional Greek world, particularly the institution of the city-state. With the collapse of the city-state came the collapse of Greek reliance on the Polis or State as the authoritative context and ultimate justification of moral action. Unable any longer to turn to the Polis for reliable answers to the question how should I live my life, unable to find such answers in the forms of traditional religion, and unable to trust Society, such as it was, for such answers, Zeno turned to Nature as the one remaining source of trustworthy moral principles. This turning not to the State, not to God, and not to Society, but to Nature is the essence of the Stoic way.

From Zeno to the more famous Roman Stoics, Cicero, Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, the center of stoic inquiry was the search for a firm support for the moral life. Not what can I know? but how should I live? was the great overriding question. And from Zeno to Marcus Aurelius the aim was to answer that question by providing a basis for moral action and a means to personal well being in the natural endowments of any man, irrespective of social status or personal circumstances.

Stoic thought has three main divisions; physics (a theory of matter, and motion, creation, change, etc.) logic, and ethics, and the great strength of stoicism lies in its subordinating everything to the last of these. Zeno held, as William James would later, that theoretical inquiry was without value unless it had significance for the moral life. This is the stubbornly practical side of stoicism; everything is to be judged by whether or not it has concrete implications for our actual and daily lives. Fortunately, and this is another strength of Stoic thought, Zeno was no anti-intellectual. He held that true morality was impossible without knowledge, particularly the knowledge of the natural world which has come to be called science.

Stoicism drew from Heraclitus the idea that all individual things in the world are manifestations of one primary substance. "Always think of the universe" says Marcus Aurelius, "as one living organism, with a single substance and a single soul." From this is drawn the central and basic stoic perception that "there is a law which governs the course of nature and should govern human actions."

Stoicism is above all an immensely practical way of life. It was the stoics who divided all human concerns into two categories, those things a person can change and those he cannot, and went on to argue that we should only concern ourselves with those things we can change. Thus, instead of conceding the accidents of birth, fortune and health to be all-important in determining our lives, the stoics urged that we concentrate on those things within reach of our own wills. The well known prayer of

Reinhold Niebuhr, "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference," is in fact an admirable expression of the stoic outlook, directing attention as it does not to metaphysics or epistemology but always to ethics, to practical issues on the conduct of life.

Since stoicism held, centrally, that there was one law for man and for nature, it followed that one might indeed study nature in order to learn that law for men. "Reserve your right to any deed or utterance that accords with nature" says Marcus Aurelius, "do not be put off by the criticism or comments that may follow . . . those who criticise you have their own reason to guide them, and their own impulse to prompt them; you must not let your eyes stray towards them, but keep a straight course and follow your own nature and the World nature (and the way of these two is one.)" And in another place Marcus Aurelius says, in what is one of his most extreme and most provocative observations, "Nothing can happen to any man that nature has not fitted him to endure."

Stoicism also has a decidedly religious quality. In contrast to Epicureanism which held that the universe is made up of atoms and empty space, the stoics held that God is immanent in all created things, but has no separate existence outside them. This was no mere dogma, one hears clear religious conviction in, for example, the hymn of Cleanthes which begins "O God most glorious, called by many a name/ Nature's great king, through endless years the same." And, along with this openly religious tone, there is in much Stoic writing a marked sense of gladness or joy, quite in contrast to the popular notion of the grim stoic sage with his stiff upper lip. "O world," says Marcus, "I am in tune with every note of thy great harmony. For me nothing is early, nothing late, if it be timely for thee. O Nature, all that thy seasons yield is fruit for me. From thee and in thee and to thee are all things."

Most important of all is the Stoic insistence on the importance of the individual's own will. Over and over in Marcus Aurelius' notes to himself, (usually called *The Meditations*) we find such things as "No matter to what solitudes banished, I have always been a favorite of fortune. For Fortune's favorite is the man who awards her good gifts to himself." or this, "What is the very best that can be said or done with the materials at your disposal? Be it what it may, you have the power to say it or do it. Let there be no pretense that you are not a free agent."

This emphasis upon the individual and upon things that lie within reach of the individual will is fundamental not only to Stoicism, but to the entire context in which stoicism arose. As George Boas notes, "In spite of the fundamental differences in the Greek and Latin ethical schools, they all agreed that the end of life was personal self-sufficiency (autarchy), that is, freedom from all claims made by the external world upon the soul of the individual."

All these elements, religious feeling, a sense of joy and awakening, an emphasis on what the individual is able to do for himself, in this world, all these enter into stoicism, or as we should probably call it, the stoic way, which we can now summarize, and I am drawing here on George Hicks' excellent book on the subject. "The all embracing end, which



is never a means, they found in life itself, a life consistent and harmonious, the smooth flow of existence unchecked by eddies and cross currents. Of such a life activity and energy, not feeling or emotion, are the constituent elements. To live such a life, the individual person must be in harmony with his own individual nature and at the same time the nature of the whole universe. In the formula "follow Nature" the word nature may mean the nature of the universe or our human nature, but since we are organic parts of the universe, the two interpretations come in the end to the same thing."

The influence of the Stoic way has been very great. It was, as William Lecky tells us, in his History of European Morals, the religion of the Roman upper classes -- and a religion in the sense that it was not merely a creed they professed but a way of life they habitually followed. And a nineteenth century writer on law, James Lorimer, carries that observation a step further. "Inasmuch as the practical recognition of a doctrine by mankind, their acting consistently as if they believed it, is a more unequivocal proof of their belief than any expression of opinion . . . we should dwell for a little on the vast acceptance which Stoicism experienced, and the influence which it exercised. With the single exception of Christianity, no form of belief ever took possession of so great a number of Europeans or held it so long . . . it moulded human institutions and affected human destiny to a greater extent than all the other philosophical systems either of the ancient or the modern world."

Alfred North Whitehead has argued that the very concepts of the moral order and the order of nature come down to us by way of the stoic philosophy. Stoicism was a major influence in early Christianity, and it re-appears in every age. Its Renaissance revival may be seen in Montaigne, Bacon and others, it was pervasive during the eighteenth century, being especially important to the Enlightenment. Perry Miller has argued that the Arminian version of Puritanism is akin to stoicism in its emphasis on will, and stoic ideas show up strongly in eighteenth and nineteenth century German writers and thinkers who were so important to the American Romantics. William Ellery Channing was struck, for example, by what he called "the heroic stoicism of Fichte". And indeed, if, as one writer on the subject argues, the essence of stoicism is "the recognition of the supremacy of conscience, yet with no projection of the desired life into any juster or sterner world, its appeal cannot but continue to hold."

This, then, is the stoic tradition as it appeared to the American Transcendentalists in the 1830's, and if I have done this right, it should be evident by now that there is a major strain of stoicism in Transcendentalism and indeed in Emerson's own thought. Emerson was in fact familiar with the important stoic thinkers and writers. He read Marcus Aurelius for example as early as 1826, and again in 1829.

He quoted from him often, and kept up with new translations. And some of the most characteristic aspects of Emerson's thought bear a strong family resemblance to old stoic ideas articulated by Marcus Aurelius, to take just the one figure. By the mid 1830's for example, Emerson had developed, in good stoic fashion, an overriding concern with ethical matters. In a lecture on the ethical writers in English Literature (January 7, 1836)

Emerson ended the talk with a definition of "the law which ethics treats" as being what "we mean by the nature of things, the law of all action which cannot yet be stated, it is so simple," the law of "which every man has glimpses in a lifetime and values what he knows of it more than all knowledge." Though not yet put in Emerson's best language, this is his ethical center, consisting of the two main stoic imperatives, Study Nature (by which he means not just the green world, but the nature of things) and trust your self. Emerson himself specifically recognized these as stoic principles. In a lecture on "Ethics" in his 1837 Philosophy of History lecture series, he said that "the sufficient rule of all ethics is comprised in the stoical precept, Reverence thyself."

Looking at Emersonian self-reliance as a version of stoicism helps us see that self-reliance is not mere selfishness or withdrawal from society or denial of the importance of the community or an empty claim to total self-sufficiency. It is instead rooted in the relation between man and nature. And here we may recall Emerson's best definition of self-reliance, which does not occur in the famous essay but in a preparatory lecture written in 1837. In this, he describes Self-Trust as "not a faith in man's own whim or conceit as if he were quite severed from all other beings and acted on his own private account, but a perception that the mind common to the universe is disclosed to the individual through his own nature."

Elsewhere, in "The American Scholar," and echoing Marcus Aurelius, Emerson could insist that the laws of nature are the laws of the human mind, and that therefore, the ancient precept "know thyself" and the modern precept "study nature" become at last one maxim.

For Emerson then, the stoic is emphatically not the unfeeling person, grimly enduring the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, but a teacher, the teacher of self-trust and trust in nature. Here is the stirring conclusion of the first part of the essay on "Self-Reliance," calling for this new teacher; "Let a stoic open the resources of man, and tell men they are not leaning willows, but can and must detach themselves: that with the exercise of self-trust, new powers shall appear; that a man is the word made flesh, born to shed healing in the nations, that he should be ashamed of our compassion, but that the moment he acts from himself, tossing all the laws, the books, idolatries and customs out of the window, we pity him no more, but thank and revere him, and that teacher shall restore the life of man to splendor and make his name dear to all history." Emerson himself was one such teacher; Thoreau was another.

Emerson's frequent references to stoic thought surge with conviction. He associates it most clearly with certain basic ethical truths about the relation between man and the world, truths that have the permanent and binding force of religion and which are characterized by joy and affirmation, but truths which cannot, by their very nature, be successfully institutionalized.

"It is true," Emerson wrote in a lecture called "The Sovereignty of Ethics" "that stoicism, always attractive to the intellectual and cultivated, has now no temples, no academy, no commanding Zeno or Antoninus. It accuses us that it has none; that

pure ethics is not now formulated and concreted into a cult, a fraternity with assemblings and holy days, with song and book, with brick and stone. Why have not those who believe in it and love it left all for this and dedicated themselves to write out its scientific scriptures to become its Vulgate for Millions? I answer for one that the inspirations we catch of this law are not continuous and technical but joyful sparkles, and are recorded for their beauty, for the delight they give not for their obligation. And that is their priceless gift to man . . . ."

This, then, is what Emerson means by stoicism, an affirmation, underpinned by a deep sense of joy and wonder, that the same laws that govern nature govern man, that, as Buckminster Fuller, that latter day saint of the Transcendental faith, has recently put it, "Nature is the law." We should not then be surprised to find Matthew Arnold identifying Emerson with the great stoic tradition and saying that while he (Emerson) was not a great poet, a great writer or a great philosophy maker, his relation to us was superior to all these. "His relation to us," Arnold says, "is more like that of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, the friend and aider of those who would live in the spirit." Nor should we be surprised when Emerson himself says of Transcendentalism that "this way of thinking, falling on Roman times, made stoic philosophers" and we should not be surprised to find Emerson bestowing the epithet stoic upon Henry Thoreau as the highest kind of praise.

For if Stoicism is important to Emerson's thought, it is even more so for Thoreau. And just as it is certain stoic ideas that matter for Emerson -- not the personality stereotype of the stoic -- so stoicism for Thoreau is also primarily a matter of ideas. Indeed, in Thoreau's case, I would argue that the personality was shaped by the ideas rather than the other way round. Ideas were of enormous importance to him. "After all," he once said, "it is the style of thought not the style of expression that makes the difference." Ideas for Thoreau were not abstractions, not "pellets of intellection" as Lionel Trilling once called them, and Thoreau was not interested in a calculus of abstractions or any genealogy of theories or indeed in theories themselves as such. It was Plato who made ideas into abstract principles standing behind and above real objects. Thoreau's ideas are ideas in the pre-platonic sense of the word, in which an idea means something actually seen, a perception. Thought of this way, it is easy to see that certain ideas or perceptions lie at the center of Thoreau's whole life. William James has a wonderful description of this -- not speaking specifically of Thoreau he says, "Let us hereafter, in speaking of the hot place in a man's consciousness, the group of ideas to which he devotes himself, and from which he works, call it the habitual center of his personal energy."

In the case of Thoreau, I think Emerson was essentially right to identify that "habitual center of his personal energy" with a group of stoic ideas or perceptions. Thoreau does not mention Marcus Aurelius. Despite his friend Emerson's interest in the Roman Emperor, Thoreau may not even have read him. Yet despite the fact that he had read other stoic writers -- Cicero, Seneca, Persius; and despite an 1838 journal entry on Zeno which starts "Zeno the Stoic stood in precisely the same relation to the world that I do now," despite these and other traces

of Greek and Roman Stoicism in Thoreau, I do not think that Thoreau's stoicism was derivative in any important way. As has been said so often, he has a genius for living out what others only speculated about. Ellery Channing came near the mark when he said Thoreau's was a natural stoicism, "not learned of Epictetus" or anyone else. But wherever it came from (and why should we utterly rule out the classics) the habitual center of Thoreau's personal energy certainly included some major stoic perceptions. His thought has a strong ethical center -- he aimed, early and late, to find a firm support for the moral life in the ordinary nature of man himself. His was always the practical question, how best can I live my daily life? Then too, Thoreau is probably the greatest spokesman of the last two hundred years for the view that we must turn not to the State, not to a God, and not to Society but to Nature for our morality. He also stands as the most attractive American example -- as Emerson was the great proponent -- of the ageless stoic principle of self-trust, self reverence or self reliance (as it is variously called), and Thoreau's entire life can be thought of as one long uninterrupted attempt to work out the practical concrete meaning of the stoic idea that the laws which rule nature rule men as well.

These are not grim ideas, nor do they necessarily produce dour unfeeling men and women. Indeed Thoreau's stoicism, if we may indeed call it that, has a strong religious side and a good deal of affirmation and gladness and just plain appetite for living. It is Thoreau, after all whose trinitarian creed goes "I believe in the forest, and in the meadow, and in the night in which the corn grows." It is Thoreau who says "Surely joy is the condition of life." Over and over in his writings Thoreau elaborates on the stoic perception of the connection between the law of nature and the law for man. Over and over he says such things as "my intercourse with men is governed by the same laws with my intercourse with Nature." or "Shall not a man have his spring as well as the plants? or "I wished to ally myself to the powers that rule the universe." Most of all, in Walden we hear the same fundamental perception again and again, put in different ways and fresh lights, too many of them ever to begin to quote, though I cannot resist just this one. "Let us spend one day," he says, "as deliberately as Nature, and not be thrown off the track by every nutshell and mosquito's wing that falls on the rails . . . let us settle ourselves, and work and wedge our feet downward through the mud and slush of opinion, and prejudice, and tradition, and delusion and appearance, that alluvion which covers the globe, through Paris and London, through New York and Boston and Concord, through Church and State, through poetry, philosophy and religion till we come to a hard bottom and rocks in place, which we can call reality, and say this is, and no mistake."

In 1862, the year of Thoreau's death, appeared George Long's translation of the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius. It was an important and influential book; it has been described as the book responsible for first introducing Marcus Aurelius to a wide English speaking public, and for generating a widespread revival of interest in ancient stoic thought. A year later Matthew Arnold wrote a major essay on Marcus Aurelius, and the year after that, 1864, the American edition came out from Ticknor and Fields and copy was sent to Emerson. It is an attractive



little book, and it seems possible that when Emerson came, very shortly thereafter, to do a volume of Thoreau's letters, the example of Long's Marcus Aurelius came to mind and he set out to produce a similar kind of volume.

But I am not arguing that Thoreau is somehow more worthy our attention because he can be shown to be parallel to Marcus Aurelius. I would not wish to argue for Thoreau as the Marcus Aurelius of Concord. But I would recommend the Roman Emperor's book to those who already follow what a Transcendental enthusiast once called the Gospel according to Saint Henry. For it is not, in the last analysis, stoicism that keeps Thoreau alive, it is Thoreau who has given a whole new life and meaning and practical applicability to the ancient stoic way. Perhaps we should say rather that Marcus Aurelius was a sort of Roman Thoreau, who led an empire rather than a huckleberry party and who wrote as well as can be expected of someone who had not after all had the inestimable advantage of living or even travelling in Concord.



June 19, 1854

#### THOREAU AND MUD POND CARRY by Derek Conley.

Henry David Thoreau spent a great deal of his adult life away from the city and civilization in the out of doors, the woods and wilderness of New England. In later life he supported himself by plying the trade of surveyor, and the bulk of his work, Walden, A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Excursions in Field and Forest, The Maine Woods and Cape Cod reflects his interest in life in the wild. He once called himself "A Mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot", and as a philosopher of nature he was America's best. But how proficient was Thoreau the outdoorsman?

Some doubt as to the abilities of Thoreau the outdoorsman have occasionally arisen, at times voiced by iconoclasts perhaps wishing yet unable to poke holes in his reputation as a natural philosopher, and now and then by devoted Thoreauvians who have taken the trouble to duplicate some of his travels and compare their results with his own, only to discover their experiences somewhat at variance. Of the latter class is the essayist John McPhee who a few years ago undertook a canoe trip through Maine's north woods that followed some of Thoreau's own route on the third Maine excursion of 1857. Thoreau's experiences on this trip later found their way into print as the Allegash and East Branch chapter of The Maine Woods. Among those experiences was that of the 27th of July, when Thoreau and his companion, Edward Hoar of Concord became lost while making a canoe portage along a route known as Mud Pond Carry, a two mile trail linking the West Branch of the Penobscot river and Lake Chesuncook with the more northerly waterway system that includes Lake Chamberlain and the Allegash river. In his book The Survival of the Bark Canoe (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux; New York, 1975.), McPhee, making the same portage in 1974 wrote:

Mud Pond Carry is the way of traffic north, and has been, apparently, since a time soon after the invention of the canoe. So many

feet have scuffed across these two miles that the trail is a worn trench, lying well below the surrounding terrain, just as the roads in Somerset, many centuries old, run in deep grooves between the fields around them. It is impossible to imagine how Thoreau could have gotten lost here, how he got out of the long ditch and wandered away, for in his time it was already deep. (72)

During the summer of 1977, with both Thoreau and McPhee in my pack, I took myself in a canoe over the course Thoreau had traveled one hundred and twenty years before, and found myself at Mud Pond Carry wondering just like McPhee, how in the world could Thoreau have gotten lost there? The trail today is at least a ditch, almost a trench. Deep, pitted, rutted, filled with water, it bears more resemblance to a canal than a trail. While on my portage, I discovered long stretches where the two edges of the trench sank well below a raised center portion that occasionally almost rose above the water, but that also occasionally disappeared, leaving one to step blind and staggering into calf deep water. It is by far the wettest, and by that measure the worst portage in the north woods. In the midst of it, I nominated it as probably the worst in the world.

Having thus set the scene, how could Thoreau, whom I felt I knew as an at least competent if not expert woodsman, lose his way? To do so would take quite an effort on his part, first to climb out of the ditch and then wander off so as not to find it again, even with map and compass, which he carried. Was the head of this brilliant natural philosopher so much in the clouds that he could do all this without realizing it until he was lost?

Thoreau recounts\* that shortly after beginning the portage, his Indian guide, Joe polis, who had gone ahead with the canoe, returned to tell them of a place where they might leave the trail for awhile and take a dry path alongside, "it being better walking" (213). Polis assured them they would have no trouble if they just followed his footprints. As they progressed along this lesser trail, it soon became apparent that "it was impossible for us to discern the Indian's trail in the elastic moss" (214). Furthermore, a number of other logging paths crossed theirs so that after awhile, which path was theirs became undecipherable. Thoreau began to suspect they were lost:

The walking rapidly grew worse, and the path more indistinct, and at length . . . we found ourselves in a more open and regular swamp made less passable than ordinary by the unusual wetness of the season. We sank a foot deep in water and mud at every step, and sometimes up to our knees, and the trail was almost obliterated . . . It would have been amusing to behold the dogged and deliberate pace at which we entered that swamp, without interchanging a word, as if determined to go through it, should it come up to our necks. (215)

Why had Thoreau gone so far? Why could he not find the Carry again?

Later in the course of my trip I happened, early one morning when I was up paddling at the crack of dawn, to come upon a man, a guide as it turned out,

who was up fixing breakfast for his clients, still yet fast asleep in a nearby circled line of brightly colored tents. I paddled to the bank and fell to conversation with the man, who said he had been taking people through the north woods for nearly thirty years. After awhile our talk turned to the subject of Mud Pond Carry and how the trail had turned into a ditch.

"Well you know how it's real deep towards the sides and high in the middle?" I nodded yes. "You see about twenty years ago there was a fella who lived somewhere up here, a retired logger, and he used to make money during the summer by hauling people and their canoes over the portage with his equipment. Charge 'em a small fee and take 'em from one end to the other. But you can see what that tractor did to the trail--dug it right out. Even the high ground about halfway along that used to be barely a path, that got dug down too."

So it seemed the trail had changed considerably since the time Thoreau had wandered away from it. Further research revealed that the area was logged heavily some years after Thoreau was there, the loggers making heavy use of horse-drawn wagons on the portage path to carry supplies in and timber out. Some of these wagons remained behind when the loggers moved on, and a photograph from the Gleason collection shows one of them loaded with canoes and about to embark on a journey down the trail accompanied by a group of men and women canoeists in a denuded forest area, in May of 1920.

With this in mind, I would conjecture that Thoreau became lost close to the midpoint of the trail, which in his time had not been worn down to a ditch because of the exceedingly rocky ground it passed over. It was here that the trail Thoreau wanted to take would have been most indistinguishable from the numerous other logging trails criss-crossing the area. Given the main path's resemblance to others in the area at the time, his guide's instructions to take a slight detour from the Carry, and the subsequent absence of his guide's promised footprints, it is easy to see how Thoreau and his companion could have become lost.

Even at that, Thoreau's experience was short-lived. The two of them were found by their guide after only a few hours, and following his instructions, managed to successfully meet up with him on the shores of Chamberlain Lake by nightfall. From there they went on to spend another successful week in the woods before returning to civilization.

And what did Thoreau think of the whole episode? Later he wrote (221), "As it was, I would not have missed that walk for a good deal."

\*All quotations are from the Illustrated Maine Woods, ed. by Joseph J. Moldenhauer, Princeton University Press, 1974.



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HENRY by Jean Cummins. Directed by Kerk Fisher. Presented by The Philadelphia Company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania July 21, 22, 27 & 28. Reviewed by Peter McInerney.

"Henry," a two-act play about the death and life of Henry Thoreau, written by Jean Cummins of Cleve-

land, was presented in four performances during the last two weekends of July by The Philadelphia Company's Drama Workshop. The sixty seat theater of The Company is located several blocks from City Hall on South Broad Street, a few doors down from the stately Academy of Music. On the humid evening of July 28, when I attended the last performance of "Henry," the Academy's ample, magnificent hall was sheltering Richard Kiley's Man of La Mancha from the heat, in a production which attracted a fashionable audience. The Philadelphia Company focused an intimate production on a stage so small it appeared too cramped to hold all the players. But the interest Ms. Cummins stimulated in the problematic pathos of her hero soon expanded the stage's boundaries. The play impelled the sixty playgoers that hot, steamy Saturday evening to forget that the tiny theater's noisy air conditioning had been turned off for the performance.

Mourted by the Company as part of its program for bringing new plays by young playwrights to performance, "Henry" is a passionately researched and warmly inspired work. Its Concordian characters came to life in the voices and gestures of a skillful and impressively disciplined cast. Led by Terry O'Toole as Henry Thoreau, Larry Santoro as his friend Ellery Channing, Gail Wilson as his sister Sophia, Sidney Baden as R. W. Emerson, and Polly Davis as the "grass widow" Lucy Brown, all under the shrewd direction of Kerk Fisher, the actors evolved their roles while absorbing last minute rewrites and also, it seemed, the spirits of the Transcendentalist men and women Jean Cummins had willed to life.

Set throughout in Concord, at the houses of the Thoreaus and Emersons and in a Concord meadow, the play begins with Thoreau's death. Flashing back to his relationships with his family and acquaintance, beginning with his late Harvard years, the affair with Ellen, the death of John, acceptance and displacement by the Emerson-Fuller circle, and then moving through the late friendships with Channing, Ricketson, and Blake, Cummins sees Henry's life as a prolonged bout of loneliness, suffered by a man who had a lot of love to give but no one to give it to. "Henry" argues that a struggle for Henry's love--by his mother, Cynthia Dunbar Thoreau, his literary sire Emerson, his male-bonded companion Channing--and Henry's struggle to love the important women in his life, Sophia Thoreau, Lucy Brown, and Ellen Sewall, shaped the course of his career.

The drama of Ellen's rejection of Thoreau, in the context of his rivalry for her with John, sets the tone for the play's dramatic action. John's death, and Thoreau's perception that his mother had lost with him her favorite son, completes the first scenario in a pattern of disappointment. Next Ms. Cummins has Emerson forbid the love of his wife's sister, Lucy, in order to demonstrate Emerson's own possessive obsession with the literary career of this uncompliant rising young man. What is left in the play's account of Thoreau's mature life is an effeminate Ricketson whose concern for Thoreau's ideas is parodied as blatantly homosexual, a cynical Channing whose deep friendship for Thoreau is seen to have included an homoerotic energy Thoreau did not reciprocate, the grotesquely comic proposal of Sophia Ford and, when Thoreau's frustrations and failures and illness have etherealized him, a sound, sympathetic friendship with H. G. O. Blake. Throughout the play, Sophia Thoreau's deep affection and wise concern for her brother is a port



in Thoreau's life-storm, and her role is an endearing one.

Transforming the history of a life--somewhat obscure then, famous now--into drama can be rough going, for an audience as well as a playwright. Perhaps one had to know the other versions of Thoreau's life to appreciate this one--the first, except for Ethel Seybold's more scholarly Thoreau: The Quest and the Classics, undertaken by a woman. In its present form the tension in "Henry" between history and drama is a fierce one, and the play depends on some prior knowledge of Thoreau and the Concord group. "Right now," Ms. Cummins says, "the play suffers...from trying to be both a historical, episodic piece...AND a dramatic one...." Thus "Henry" understands Thoreau as that man who lived and wrote, but also as a little like the Byron of Hours of Idleness and the Faust of Goethe's tragedy.

Historical sources for Ms. Cummins's drama were eclectic. Her bibles were Walter Harding's The Days of Henry Thoreau, and especially the Harding-Bode edition of the Correspondence, supplemented by what she calls "some interesting gossip tidbits" in the journals of Hawthorne and anecdotes from such figures as Louisa May Alcott. She has read these biographical and primary sources with great insight, and created a dramatic biography of those dimensions of Thoreau's "inner life" which were omitted in Sherman Paul's excellent The Shores of America. Ms. Cummins's Thoreau is an historical figure, like Harding's, and a metaphysician, like Paul's. But more so than in Richard Lebeaux's Young Man Thoreau, he is a real human being whose principled career and highly wrought writings were in part responses to disappointments in love every human being knows. "I was looking for emotional insights rather than critical interpretations," Ms. Cummins says. "I wrote the play because I wanted to explore Thoreau's non-heroic and humane side." Therefore there are no interludes in "Henry" when critical readings of Thoreau's early or late essays, A Week or Walden are advocated. There is no axe ground as there is in Lawrence's and Lee's anti-Vietnam vehicle, "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail." And unlike Christopher Childs's "Clear Sky, Pure Light," Ms. Cummins's Thoreau is defined by other players as well as himself.

Jean Cummins's play does not debate other works about Thoreau--whether biographical, critical, or dramatic. But it does add very much color to the profiles of Thoreau we have. Cummins's Thoreau is a man among men and also among women, not the stoic-ascetic and precious crank many readers have learned to imagine. He is a complex man, caught in webs of affection which grew taut and diseased, like his tubercular lungs. "Henry" is not the whole man, not the life itself, but it can suggest, even to those readers least inclined to manipulate the biographical fallacy, that take him all in all, he was a man, a man whose unhappiness in love was transformed by principle and art into triumph.



August 15, 1854

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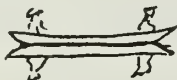
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August 16, 1854

#### GREMLINS AROUND:

- Gremlins seem to have got into our works of late.
- (1). Many of you sent in self-addressed envelopes asking for a copy of my sermon on "Thoreau and the Caterpillar Clergy" offered in the summer bulletin, but I goofed and sent some of you only the first two pages of a four-page sermon. If I did that to you send me a postal card note (never mind the self-addressed stamped envelope) and I'll send you the last two pages by return mail.
  - (2). The minutes of the 1980 annual meeting reported in the summer bulletin got garbled and should have included the statement that the society voted to donate two thousand dollars to the Adams Woods Fund.
  - (3). The letter from Thoreau to John Russell of May 31, 1856, first published in our Spring, 1980 bulletin inadvertently dropped a whole line. The first sentence of the third paragraph should read, "As for the Ranunculuses, I have observed R. aquatilis (var fluviatilis)---Purshii---Reptans (var. filiformis)---Abortivius [?] (rare here) ---Recurvatus---Fascicularis---Repans---Bulbosus--- & Acris [?] ."

Our apologies for all these errors.



August 27, 1854

#### THE ANNUAL WINTER MEETING

The 1980 annual winter meeting of the Thoreau Society will be held, as usual, in conjunction with the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association. It will be held in Houston, Texas, in the Mesquite Room of the Hyatt Hotel, on Monday evening, December 29, 1980 from 7:15 to 8:30 p.m. The program will be based on work coming out of the textual center of the Princeton Edition and will be entitled "Editing Thoreau: Textual Evidence and the Writer's Craft." Robert Sattelmeyer of the University of Missouri will speak on "Thoreau's Unpublished Journal and the Genesis of A WEEK and WALDEN."

Elizabeth Witherell, editor-in-chief of the edition, will speak on "Poetry in Thoreau's Artistic Development." And Kevin Van Anglen of Harvard will speak on "Thoreau as Translator." Walter Harding will chair the meeting. Non-members of the MLA are welcome to attend the session and need only stop off at the information desk to pick up a special admission card for the session. Suggestions of themes or topics for the 1981 winter meeting will be welcomed by your secretary.



August 30, 1854

#### NOTES AND QUERIES

President Anne McGrath has announced the appointment of the following nominating committee for 1981: Linda Henning, Lincoln, Mass., chairman, Edmund Schofield, Jr., Columbus, Ohio, and J. Parker Huber, Willimantic, Ct. Members of the committee will welcome suggestions for nominations.

The society is indebted once again to August Black of Morris, Illinois, this time for a contribution of \$600 to cover the cost of printing and mailing this bulletin.

\$100,000 is still needed in the drive to raise funds to purchase the Adams tract (which includes the Andromeda Ponds near Walden) and preserve it permanently. Donations should be sent to the Adams Woods Project, Lincoln Conservation Commission, Town Hall, Lincoln, Mass. 01773.

Plays about Thoreau seem to be particularly popular these days. Above we review one by Jean Cummins. Philip C. Sneed recently wrote and produced DEAR WALDEN, a one-man portrayal of Thoreau, as part of his degree work at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Wayne Baltz and Terry Baltz of Fort Collins, Col., have recently written an original screen play, A DIFFERENT DRUMMER, and are searching for a sponsor for TV production. We have read both of these and found them impressive. We understand that another play was written at Amherst College last spring as an honors project. Can anyone send us details?

Professor Jinzaboro Nyui of Sendai, Japan, has recently become a life member of the Society. Life memberships are \$100.

The Thoreau Society of Japan held its annual meeting at Konan University in Kobe on May 23, 1980. Speakers were Midori Yamamoto on "Thoreau Revisited by Kurt Vonnegot, Jr.," Masao Jamada on "Thoreau's Wildness," and Sachiko Fujisawa on "Thoreau as a Poet."

Prof. Kuo-Chien Liang of the National Taiwan Normal University has recently donated ten copies of his book THE SUPERNATURAL-LIFE MOTIF IN THOREAU'S WORKS (Taipei: Crane, 1980) to the Thoreau Society and they are being distributed to the major Thoreau reference collections--the Thoreau Society Archives, the Thoreau Lyceum, the Abernethy Collection at Middlebury College, the Huntington Library in San Marino, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, Princeton University Library, and Harvard University Library so that American scholars may have regular access to it.

Does anyone know whether the unbound copies of the first edition of A WEEK that Thoreau kept in his attic were in sheets (that is, unfolded) or in folded signatures?

A current Hallmark card attributes to Thoreau: "Every blade in the field, every leaf in the forest, lays down its life in its season as beautifully as it was taken up." Does anyone know its source?